

India's Military Modernization: Challenges and Prospects, edited by Rajesh Basrur, Ajaya Kumar Das and Manjeet S. Pardesi, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 309, INR 950

*Lee Cordner**

The emergence of India as an Asian great power in line with its economic development in recent years is a matter of significant strategic interest regionally and globally. India's unique position as the world's most populous democracy, with its diverse societal mix combined with its central geostrategic position, places it at the core of Asian and Indo-Pacific Ocean economic and strategic considerations. Land borders with China, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh combined with aspirations for strategic dominance in the Indian Ocean, and possession of nuclear weapons in the framework of a national policy of strategic autonomy and a stated desire for greater defence self-reliance, add to India's uniqueness. These factors underscore the importance for both international and domestic audiences to understand India's strategic ambitions and prospects. Analysts struggle to gain that understanding because of the lack of overt Indian defence policy documents and joint military doctrine perpetrated by an apparently incoherent politico-civil-military establishment where the elite largely operate in a policy environment of ambiguity. In this light, the edited compendium of expert insights into India's efforts to modernize its defence forces, drawn together by Singapore's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), is a welcome contribution.

* The reviewer is with the Indo-Pacific Governance Research Centre, University of Adelaide, Australia, and was a Visiting International Fellow with the Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, in early 2014.

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The stated aim of the book is 'to closely look at India's military forces and its defence policy to understand how India's armed forces are re-moulding themselves and responding to the demands of the emerging strategic setting' with subtexts of defence policymaking, progress with modernization and military effectiveness (p. 2). The recent Indian historical background is adequately summarized to present a context in which India maintains one of the world's largest defence forces sustained by an expenditure that is slightly less than 3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). Despite efforts over many decades to improve India's military industrial base, the vast majority of weapons systems continue to be procured from international sources: initially, Britain; then the Soviet Union; and more recently, from diverse sources, including primarily Russia and also Israel and the West. The Indian policy aspiration for defence self-sufficiency to underpin strategic autonomy remains largely specious and elusive.

Much of the book is devoted to separately analysing modernization aspirations, challenges and prospects for individual elements of the Indian armed forces and defence sectors. This is consistent with how each of the Indian defence elements largely develops policy, doctrine and capability requirements as independent entities. The Indian Navy (IN) is pursuing an impressive and ambitious modernization programme to both qualitatively and quantitatively improve itself as a balanced force that recognizes the rapidly changing regional strategic context. The IN is faced with 'considerable obstacles' in its endeavours to realize its plans that mostly 'emanate from the inherent inefficiencies of the defence apparatus, caused by the prevailing civil-military relationship and long pending reforms' (p. 46). While strategic, budgetary and force structure issues are well covered, the chapter on the IN surprisingly makes no mention of the internal challenges posed for an organization struggling to cope with rapid expansion and modernization as evinced by the spate of tragic accidents and safety incidents in recent years.

Policy and doctrinal challenges are also cited as core obstacles to the future prospects for the Indian Air Force (IAF). The requirements for a balanced air force that can provide both air power dominance and effective support to ground forces are articulated. The inadequacies of the Indian aviation industry are lamented along with India's 'dismal' (p. 84) research and development performance that have so far failed to adequately support the development of such a technologically dependent force. Again, defence civil-military bureaucratic dysfunctionality and

defence procurement shortcomings, along with the failure of the Indian defence establishment to learn the lessons of the past, are identified as significant problems that impact modernization efforts. Reliance upon foreign suppliers for new systems and ongoing support will remain significant issues for the IAF into the foreseeable future.

The chapter on India's nuclear forces presents a balanced and informative overview of a minimally effective nuclear weapons capability supported by mature policies, doctrine and procedures designed to provide a credible deterrent while supporting a no-first use (NFU) doctrine. The ongoing separated military leadership and related lack of 'single point advice' (p. 104) about nuclear use options to the political leadership represented by the National Command Authority (NCA) is cited as potentially presenting a significant problem in a crisis. Maintaining the credibility of the nuclear deterrent is identified as vital to India's security in a dynamic and unstable region, with an attendant need for India to 'endeavour to modernize its nuclear warheads and delivery systems and keep its option to test open' (p. 113).

The chapters on India's defence industry and acquisition and offset strategies cover similar ground. They highlight major policy, structural and cultural challenges that beset a military industrial complex that has failed to perform and continues to struggle with delivering against expectations of greater indigenization of defence production. The policy mantras of self-sufficiency and self-reliance have long been central; however, the 'history of India's industrial-military complex has been particularly disheartening' (p. 134). Long-mooted defence industrial reform has proven particularly difficult to implement.

The dominance of the state-owned sector that includes some '52 research laboratories and establishments under the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), nine Defence Public Sector Undertakings (DPSUs), and 39 ordnance factories (OFs) under the administrative control of the Department of Defence' (p. 289) poses systemic challenges to effectiveness and efficiency. Although there have been some notable successes, for example, the BrahMos supersonic cruise missile system developed jointly with Russia, the Indian armed forces continue to struggle to obtain quality technological support, and basic items like ammunition stocks are in chronically short supply. The 'double paradox' (p. 260) of India's defence industry is apparent; despite the large number of national facilities India remains a major importer of arms, ammunition and weapons systems, with Russia continuing to play an

important role despite cost increases and delivery shortcomings in recent years. The lack of political will and bureaucratic intransigence continue to have profoundly negative effects. Changes to the defence 'offset policy' (p. 164), for example, are unlikely to be effective and national defence productivity will remain suboptimal. Restructuring the Indian defence industrial base presents major challenges that impact modernizing the Indian defence forces.

Rare insights into India's internal security and counter-insurgency context are presented that highlight the complexities of the national security challenges being faced. The combined strength of the 'Central Armed Police Forces (CAPFs)' in 2011 that 'have failed to break the threshold of mediocrity to emerge as effective security providers' was reported to be '777,728 divided into 516 operational battalions' (pp. 170–71). They comprise seven different units that come under the Ministry of Home Affairs; they are separate from Defence. The need to operate in a complex and ever-changing domestic politico-strategic environment and to engage with the civil population in areas like Jammu and Kashmir presents huge challenges. Leadership shortcomings, an inability to adapt, legal constraints, the need for close contact with civilian populations, and the lack of inter-force cooperation and organizational learning between the CAPFs, the army, and the police are cited as impediments to modernization.

The evolving strategic and defence relationships between India and the United States (US), and India and Russia plus the US–China–India triumvirate are addressed. Issues like dealing with the rise of China, common maritime security needs, and defence trade have led to enhanced cooperation between India and the US, which is likely to slowly expand further in the future. The relationship with Russia is more problematic, with 'a degree of tension' remaining with regard to India's 'overdependence on Russia' (p. 278), particularly in the military equipment domain. India has become an importance strategic partner for the US and the West, and while economic interaction with the West and China has increased trade with Russia has markedly reduced. India's propensities for pragmatism and ambiguity, and aspirations for strategic autonomy, are evident in its bilateral partnerships with the US and Russia and numerous other states not mentioned in the book, for example, Saudi Arabia and Australia.

One of the greatest challenges to the modernization of India's military that impacts the ability of India's defence forces to effectively operate in a complex and dynamic strategic environment is the need

to reform civil–military relations. This has long been recognized, the need for change has been advocated in numerous post-operational reports and reviews, yet little has really changed. Unlike most Western democracies where civilian control of the military is exercised by elected politicians, ‘civilian control’ of the military in India is applied by career, generalist civil servants who subject the military to ‘strong bureaucratic control’ (p. 200). They also provide advice to government on national security matters while lacking expertise in military affairs. The triangular relationship between politicians, bureaucrats and military leaders, with the latter largely shut out of the national security decision-making apparatus, has led to ongoing allegations of a ‘lack of communication and understanding’ (p. 204) that has negative implications for military effectiveness. The lack of integration between the armed forces and the civilian defence administration impacts defence planning, procurement and human resource development. Importantly, strategic understanding and decision-making by politicians is undermined as they are effectively kept at arm’s length from military advice. The overriding issue, not drawn out in the book, is the combination of weak politicians and a powerful Indian bureaucracy that is happy with the status quo. This ensures the stasis in Indian strategic policy development will likely continue.

The final chapter by Prakash Menon presents an informed and concise overview of India’s military modernization that places in context reforms that are largely replacing aging capabilities and are consistent with India’s emerging economic power, national security concerns and regional responsibilities. He briefly comments on modernization of the Indian Army, which has been largely overlooked in the earlier chapters despite being a force of around 1 million under arms with major challenges. Consistent with several other authors, Menon identifies systemic flaws in the defence establishment as presenting major challenges and impediments to India’s military modernization aspirations. The suboptimal performance of the Indian defence industrial base is a major concern. The lack of ‘a long term vision for the security of the country’ and the need to ‘define a role for the armed forces’, along with there being ‘no mechanism in place for government to receive essential single-point advice from the military’ (p. 291) plus the lack of joint doctrine, are highlighted as significant concerns. Development of publicly available defence white papers and other policy documents to aid transparency and accountability plus the need for changes to higher defence command arrangements are inherent in these recommendations. Menon stops short

of commenting upon politico–civil–military relationships and the lack of willingness for structural reform, which other authors have identified as significant impediments to India’s development as a modern military power.

India’s Military Modernization: Challenges and Prospects is a well-written and thoughtfully edited compendium of essays that will enhance understanding about the realities of the many challenges that face India’s aspirations to develop modern and capable military forces commensurate with its growing economic and strategic stature and responsibilities. India’s emergence as the major regional power in the Indian Ocean and an Asian great power, with its unique geopolitical and societal circumstance, make such analyses important reading for national security policymakers and students of regional strategic studies.